

VZCZCXRO4467
RR RUEHDBU RUEHLN RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHAH #1311 3611111
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 271111Z DEC 06
FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8156
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS ASHGABAT 001311

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STATE FOR INR/R/MR, IIP/T, IIP/G/NEA-SA, SA
SCA/CEN, SCA/PAB, SCA/INS, SCA/RA, SCA/PPD, DRL
CENTCOM PUBLIC AFFAIRS-MAJ.BALDWIN/SGT. BAKER
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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [KMDR](#) [KPAO](#) [OIIP](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [AF](#) [TX](#)
SUBJECT: A/S BOUCHER DELIVERS MESSAGE OF A NEW BEGINNING IN
POST-NIYAZOV ERA

Summary

1. (U) Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher's December 24 visit to Turkmenistan generated a high level of international news coverage, which was mostly accurate except for some reports claiming that Boucher had an official meeting with Interim President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov. Turkmenistan's state media provided limited but accurate coverage of the visit of the U.S. delegation led by Boucher and of U.S. condolences on the death of Niyazov. Russian press was the source of most negative reports about U.S. intentions in Turkmenistan, including suggestions that the U.S. leadership had rigged the death of President Niyazov. In at least one case, English language press carried a reference to a U.S. desire for an airbase on Turkmenistan soil and a fervently anti-Bush editorial suggesting U.S. complicity in Niyazov's death. Major international and U.S. news sources tended to repeat minor factual inaccuracies about Niyazov's policies but accurately presented U.S. statements on the passing of Niyazov. End Summary.

Turkmenistan/Regional Press Largely Factual

2. (U) Turkmenistan State News Media did not attend the embassy-organized press conference for A/S Boucher and only noted his attendance at the funeral ceremonies and U.S. condolence messages. Regional press and wireservice stories generally carried accurate coverage of Boucher's Ashgabat press conference. Most noted that the U.S. hopes for a stable, constitutional transition of power and/or that the U.S. sees an opportunity for a new relationship with Turkmenistan. A handful of regional outlets in English or Russian also noted the specific areas of interest for expanded U.S. cooperation: education, health, energy policy, and border security.

3. (U) Unfortunately, some news outlets (perhaps working from AP wire coverage) used the headline, "U.S. Eyes Opportunity in Turkmenistan" or similar, giving a slightly sinister spin to A/S Boucher's comments.

4. (U) In addition, Reuters and others, apparently using Reuters material, misreported that A/S Boucher held talks with Interim President Berdimukhammedov. Another inaccuracy occurred in the Russian-language "Trend" outlet of Azerbaijan, which contained accurate information from A/S Boucher's press conference, but inaccurately wrote that he called for an "amnesty of political prisoners."

Russian Black Media Machine Busy Spinning

15. (U) Russian TV broadcaster Channel 1, also carried segments suggesting that the U.S. will now move to foment a "color revolution" in Turkmenistan and that the country could be a base for action against Iran. Post also notes that the Russian-based Regnum website carried a story reflecting the opinion of the Chairman of the Russian Islamic Committee. The Chairman insinuated that Niyazov's death was likely the work of the United States. The English language Atlantic Free Press of Groningen, Netherlands ran a particularly anti-American opinion piece, which also suggested that Niyazov would naturally have been a target of U.S. transformational diplomacy, and that Niyazov's passing would pave the way for U.S. military action against Iran from bases in Turkmenistan. Some Russian news media has reported Vladimir Zhironovsky's comments that the U.S. and Iran will now battle for influence in Turkmenistan. Other Russian language outlets also discussed the new "great game" in Central Asia following Niyazov's death.

Comment

16. (U) Overall, the accuracy and tenor of coverage for Boucher's visit was good. Some inaccuracies were probably not intentional. However, given Russian news media's penchant for anti-U.S. conspiracy theories, post is concerned that some Russian news outlets will reprint or quote at length the Atlantic Free Press article mentioned above and at the least continue to warn of a U.S. strategy for influence in the region. [End Comment.]

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